

**Evaluating a Diversity Program:  
Describing the Impact of Gender Communication Training in a  
Large Multicultural Work Environment**

**Mary Suessine  
Maria Cseh**

**Abstract:** The purpose of this evaluation study was to assess the impact of a gender communication program on employee learning, understanding, and application of its concepts in a large, multicultural Midwest utility company. The program was initially implemented by the organization when supervisors raised the need for better communication between genders in their departments. A mixed quantitative and qualitative research design was used to glean information related to the participants' knowledge, understanding, and application of the program content. Content analysis and descriptive statistics of company documents, observation, and survey data led to the following major findings: (a) significant positive communication changes in and outside of the workplace, (b) a general consensus that respect for the opposite gender culture holds an important value, (c) increased awareness of program content as pertinent to situations in participants' lives, (d) a high degree of motivation to use what was learned, and (e) the need for additional training, session follow-ups, and refresher learning aides. Based upon the findings, several recommendations were made that address pre and post program support for the participants.

**Introduction**

With competition in the global marketplace at an all time high, it is inevitable that the businesses with the most viable and knowledgeable resources remain at the height of demand (Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994). As organizations face the myriad of challenges in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, recognition is given to the company's most valuable assets—its employees (Rhinesmith, 1993; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 2000). Therefore, it is vital for organizations to maintain an employee-friendly work environment that is mutually respectful of each other's values, customs, and beliefs (Diamante & Giglio, 1994; Nilson, 1997). As a result, organizations have implemented various cultural diversity education programs that reinforce individual awareness about diversity issues, reduce biases and stereotypes, and change behaviors (Hanover & Cellar, 1998; Leonard, 1991; Miller, 1998; Solomon, 1994). Evaluative efforts are necessary in order to determine the impact of these programs especially since today's large corporate work environments encompass a culturally diverse workforce (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Phillips, 1997).

This program evaluation study was triggered by an informal discussion between the first author and the organization's senior diversity specialist. Currently, this organization has over twenty programs in place that support employee development in diversity management however, there is no evidence of systematic evaluation practices to determine their impact.

The diversity program evaluated consists of an eight-hour session that addresses the differences in communication between the male and female cultures. This program seeks to close the communication gap of misunderstanding between each gender culture by combating misinterpretations whereby creating a more cohesive relationship. The primary program objectives deal with identifying differences between each gender culture as related to speech patterns and misunderstandings that can occur, non-verbal communication barriers, and conceptual perspectives when confronted with same type situations. The evaluation was initiated by the first author in consultancy with the second author who is a university professor and authorized by the director of organizational learning. During this collaborative work, the second author provided guidance and helped focus the study. In the following sections, the evaluation study will be presented together with recommendations based upon the findings.

### **The Evaluation Study**

The purpose of this evaluation study was to investigate the impact of a gender communication program on participant learning, understanding, and application of its content. The study was conducted between September and December, 2002. The following subsections will present the design and the findings of the study.

#### ***Population and Sample***

The population of this study consisted of 350 employees of the organization that have attended the gender communication program within a two-year span since its inception. Out of 350 employees, there were 315 accessible individuals available for this study that were obtained from an attendee list up to October 12, 2002. All 315 employees were invited to participate in the written survey, however when reminder letters for the completion of the survey were sent out, six individuals notified the evaluator that they did not attend the program due to conflicting schedules. As a result, 309 participants formed the population of the study. In addition, the sample group of 18 employees for the overt observation was chosen through the convenience sampling selection method since all participants who attended the October 16, 2002 program session could be easily observed throughout the day.

#### ***Data Gathering Methods***

The quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods selected for this program evaluation were review of company documents, overt structured observation, and a written survey. In the following section each method and its process are described.

***Checklist for review of company documents.*** A checklist was developed as a guideline for conducting investigative efforts for the comprehensive research of company data. The checklist assisted in the collection of qualitative company data from various company records. The checklist was divided into three primary sections: (a) company information, (b) gender communication program, and (c) miscellaneous data. This was utilized as a guide to gather information on the organization and its operations including the gender communication program. The information gleaned from these sections pertained to data regarding company operating standards, communications, diversity-related initiatives, organizational standards and values, fiscal reports, newsletters, community events, and other miscellaneous data.

***Overt structured observation guide.*** An observation guide was designed to identify how the material was received, content and process presented, behavior related to teamwork, participant-instructor relationship, and miscellaneous activities during the overt observation of

the October 16, 2002 diversity program session. The observation guide was divided into the following three separate columns: content code, observation guidelines with guiding questions, and observed behavior. The content code paralleled the observation guideline questions for organizational purposes and easier note taking. The first author of this paper conducted the observation and both authors analyzed the data immediately after the session.

*Written survey.* The information gained from the review of company documents and observation was used to develop the initial version of the survey that was piloted with three previous participants of the program and the senior diversity specialist. After a few changes in the organization of questions and statements in their sections, the final survey consisted of three sections and addressed employee learning, understanding, and application of the program content. Section I encompassed seven closed-ended statements that contained short, simple and declarative sentences corresponding to a 5-point Likert numerical rating scale. An example of a statement is “I have had the opportunity to use what I have learned with the opposite gender in my workplace.” Section II consisted of twelve questions corresponding to a 3-point numerical rating scale. An example of a question is “To what extent has your understanding of the opposite gender culture improved?” Section III contained four qualitative statements requesting narrative input on the respondents’ level of use of the program content and any additional suggestions for future diversity training. Also included in the survey were two small gender communication program refresher charts to serve as content terminology reminders for the respondents.

On November 8, 2002, 315 surveys with cover letters explaining the purpose of study and including the survey due date were mailed by inter-office envelopes to all participants. A reminder letter to return the completed survey was emailed to all participants immediately after the due date. A total of 135 surveys (77 from the male gender, 40 from the female gender, and 18 unidentified) were returned yielding a 44% response rate. Three were omitted entirely because they contained no responses on any of the survey items. As a result, there were 132 usable surveys. Out of 132 surveys, a total of 86 participants responded to the open-ended questions.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data gathered during the observation and responses at Section III of the survey was analyzed using content analysis. All qualitative data was read several times and organized by question and color-coded. The themes emerging from the data related to: communication between genders, use of course content in team settings and problem-solving, recognition of program content at work and home, opportunities for applying what was learned, and suggestions for program enhancement. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the survey data. Two tables were designed with means and standard deviations corresponding to survey questions/statements in relation to the area of measure of knowledge, understanding, and application, and program content respectively. Bar graphs and pie charts were developed by statement/question to provide additional visual evidence of the results.

### ***Findings***

The overall mean scores from the quantitative data, gleaned from the survey, showed that in most cases new learning was evident in the knowledge, understanding, and application of the program content. Overall, responses received from the program participants reveal the positive nature of this type of program and the never ending need for more follow up and monitoring in order to ensure its positive impact. The observation revealed that although participants were interested in learning the communication concepts, not all in the session observed were comfortable using the knowledge enough to try the new behavior during the time of the observed

session. There were however, discussions that maintained a discovery of concept recognition when it came to identifying differences in communicating. Behavior in the session revealed instances where each gender culture was attentive to the other during discussions and team activities. Group synergy developed as both gender cultures problem-solved during the case studies. In addition, friendly conversations were forged and a sense of camaraderie soon followed. The major findings that emerged from this study are presented in the following paragraphs.

***Significant positive communication changes in and outside of the workplace.*** When participants were asked to describe a time they used what they learned in the program, evidence showed that they were able to use various communication techniques learned from the program both at work and outside the work setting. As one of the participants recalled, “I feel that I have been better able to understand what is being communicated. For example, as a man I am not always being asked to just kill a problem. Sometimes the process is more important to a person than the outcome.” Other participants expressed their use of what they have learned on an everyday basis while working one-on-one or in teams. “I try and use it on a daily basis and especially when in meetings with others,” said one of the male participants. “Everyday! Being a female and working with mostly men, this program came in handy!” recalled another participant. One male participant commented, “I still tend to fall back into old habits at times, but I am coming along.” Other participants talked about their improved communication outside work with their family members and friends. Although 91% of the participants agree that outcomes of their work responsibilities that require communication with the opposite gender have improved since participating in the program, there were participants who either did not remember the content of the program or did not use it. This could be explained by the fact that some participants attended the session two years before the evaluation was conducted. As one participant of an earlier session stated, “Perhaps this survey would have been more effective if it were given about a few months after the class. I feel I couldn’t honestly answer your questions this long after the class.”

***A general consensus that respect for the opposite gender culture holds an important value.*** Participants placed a high importance on respecting the culture of the opposite gender (mean = 4.6) and 34% felt that their understanding of the opposite gender culture had improved. One of the participants recalled how “In a committee meeting with mostly women, female chair-people took turns stating options - this was very frustrating to me. However, I understood the dynamics and did not interfere with the process.” Another person concluded with “I learned how to treat people right and respect the different values.”

***Increased awareness of program content as pertinent to situations in participants’ lives.*** Participants were in agreement that they had an increased awareness of the program content (mean = 3.8). One participant explained, “A coworker came to me to discuss a problem, but they were *processing* [term used in the program] so I did not become impatient with them. I recognized what they were doing and adjusted my behavior.” Another person said, “Just being aware of differences helps to understand the other person’s perspective and why they are acting the way they do.” A female participant reflected on one of her experiences in the following way: “I was sitting in an all men (but me) meeting (again). The plant manager stated that we would fail if we exhibited any of the following behaviors: (a) make excuses, (b) be defensive, (c) point fingers, (b) be unable to internalize issues. I talked to him the next day and helped explain why he may not get desired results based upon his audience. I suggested this class to help him learn what behaviors he could help change.” Another participant recalled, “In a personal relationship, I was having a conversation with a friend of the opposite sex and I was able to better relate to what he was saying and why because of the training.”

*A high degree of motivation to use what was learned.* Participants agreed that they felt motivated to use what they learned about the opposite gender both at work and outside work (mean = 4.0). One participant wrote, “Now that I know what to watch for, my opportunities to practice are increasing” while another recalled, “At home I was talking with my spouse and I listened harder (didn’t react) and applied what I learned, whoa. This [program] actually worked for me!!” During the observation, participants also commented that they could not wait to use what they learned. Some of the participants wrote about the need for their managers and peers to participate in the program to understand and support them in their communication.

*The need for additional training, session follow-ups, and refresher learning aides.* Numerous suggestions were made regarding additional support for enhancement of program content learning. Some requests included the need for refresher courses and follow-up efforts that included mini-courses, refresher slides, and information via email. The need for learning aides was suggested. One participant wrote, “I would like a bookmark that contains a brief highlight” while another asked for “visual reminders-signs posted in work areas. Could be as simple as bullet items shown below, just something to spark memory.” Another participant explained, “I received this training well over a year ago and I am sorry to say that a lot of the information that was presented has faded in memory. I remember leaving that day feeling very enlightened and it did have a positive affect on my communication skills with the opposite sex. But as with any training, if there are no reminders that you can glance at every now and then, the key points will soon be forgotten.” Additional requests were made for program offerings on culture differences, women in leadership/leadership styles, communication, and email writing.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The evaluation study on the gender communication program has provided a plethora of information regarding the program’s impact on employee learning, understanding, and application of the content presented. The outcomes of this study will enable the organization to utilize a baseline of information that will assist in decision making regarding the offering of this program, enhancement of the program, and serve as a model for future program evaluations. The evaluation report was presented to the senior diversity specialist. The following recommendations were included in the report:

- Conduct the evaluation study immediately after the end of the program with follow-ups after three months and possible six months.
- Facilitate a focus group follow-up session with the program graduates to discuss their comments regarding the program after they have had a chance to use the concepts from the session.
- Provide employees with results of the evaluation in order to build trust in the process and encourage continued effort and motivation towards the use of newly learned concepts.
- Offer employees a prerequisite course consisting of introductory concepts related to communication as a prelude to the gender communication program content.
- Distribute information to orientate employees to the program content prior to attending the session.
- Encourage co-workers to attend the program together in order to promote department cohesiveness through mutual understanding and use of program content.
- Provide and support use of job aids for quick reference to help employees remember the program content, for example, posters in the workplace, posting on the bulletin

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board, newsletters for reminder content, quick reminders via email, pocket size reminders, etc.

- Incorporate training follow-up support in the form of refresher courses and program reunions to discuss program impact.
- Encourage supervisors to maintain a supportive environment for employees through recognition and other reinforcement for success in using newly learned skills in order to ensure transfer of learning.
- Publicize employee successes when applicable through company media such as newsletters or electronic mail as a means of positive reinforcement for sustaining behavioral change.

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Mary Suessine, 261 Wyngate Drive, Rochester, MI 48307; catellus@tir.com  
Maria Cseh, Ph.D., 435G Education and Human Services Building, Oakland University,  
Rochester, MI 48309; cseh@oakland.edu

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